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Former EIU President Gilbert Fite Dies at 92

Jul-21-2010

Gilbert C. Fite, a prominent agricultural historian who served as Eastern Illinois University's fourth sitting president from 1971 to 1976, died July 13 at the age of 92.

"We extend deepest sympathy to the Fite family for their loss," said EIU President William L. Perry. "I count myself fortunate to have met President Fite during my first year at EIU and experience first hand the sense of energy and intellect that he brought to bear during his tenure at Eastern. Dr. Fite's many contributions helped move Eastern forward in many and varied ways, and we will always be grateful for his leadership."

In keeping with his philosophy that a university must not become stagnant, Fite helped orchestrate many positive and enduring changes at Eastern.

"As an institution we draw strength from our history and traditions, but we must not be bound by them," Fite said in 1974. "The needs of students change as society changes."

As part of his dedication to continuing education and community service, Fite oversaw the implementation of the Board of Governors Bachelor of Arts Degree program, a nontraditional program that gives credit for adults' nonacademic experience. Today, the Bachelor in General Studies program has an enrollment of about 2,300 students. Fite also increased off-campus class offerings, increasing their enrollment from 350 students to more than 2,000 in just four years.

During his tenure, overall student enrollment rose from 8,214 to 9,252, an increase of 12.6 percent. Physically, the campus also grew. Additions were built for many existing facilities, including the Lantz



Eastern Illinois University President Gilbert C. Fite at his desk. *Eastern Illinois University Photo Archives, Presidents Collection*



Fite (second from left) is pictured with U.S. Vice President Gerald R. Ford (third from left), who visited campus during 1974 Diamond Jubilee. *Booth Library Photo Archives*

Health, Physical Education and Recreation Building; the Doudna Fine Arts Center (a concert hall, offices and practice areas); the Physical Science Building (including Phipps Lecture Hall); the Physical Plant Services Building; and the University Union (including two elevators).

Also, three frame houses on Ninth Street were purchased, with two used as art studios and one used for storage and an office for building service workers; Greenwood School, a one-room country school, was moved to the campus for its historic value; and East Hall was purchased for use as a residence hall.

Fite oversaw many changes at EIU, including a major administrative reorganization; the move from academic quarters to semesters; the closing of the Laboratory School; the implementation of 24-hour visitation rights in several residence halls; and a revamping of athletics' organizational and financial structure. He was instrumental in arranging private funding for the construction of the Tarble Arts Center.

Eastern hosted Vice President Gerald Ford when he accepted Fite's invitation to speak on campus in 1974 as part of the university's Diamond Jubilee.

Fite said he identified himself not as an administrator, but as an "educator-scholar." Before coming to Eastern, Fite was a professor of history at the University of Oklahoma. He was a noted author and expert on American agricultural history.

In 1976, Fite left Eastern to accept the first Richard B. Russell Professorship of History, an endowed chair at the University of Georgia.

Other honors included two Fulbright Awards, the Ford Fellowship and the Guggenheim Fellowship. He was past president of the Agricultural History Society, The Southern Historical Association and the Western History Association. He wrote nine books and more than 60 articles, co-authored seven books, and edited three volumes.

While at Eastern, Fite collected miniature elephants and drove a 1931 Model A Ford. He traveled the globe twice and spent a year teaching in India.

Fite, who was raised in South Dakota, had retired in Fort Myers, Fla. He is survived by his wife, June; two sons; and grandchildren.

An exhibit documenting Fite's time at EIU will be displayed inside of Booth Library's south entrance starting Thursday, July 22.